

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: *Mario Davidovsky*

Friday, March 4, 8:00PM

I immediately realized that sounds in electronic music behave in a completely new way. There is no physical constraint, no bow, no air to blow. I learned that the dynamic of the sound was really fantastically new, with a whole new idea of space and time. I immediately thought that those behaviors of sound were so good that I wanted to make them a part of instrumental music.

—Mario Davidovsky, interview with Bob Gluck on the website of the Electronic Music Foundation Institute

Introduction

In this theater almost exactly half a century ago, on May 9, 1961, a remarkable concert took place, to be repeated the next evening because interest was so great. Nobody performed. As Harold Schonberg reported in the *The New York Times*: “The stage was bare save for six acoustic suspension loudspeakers. The audience looked at the speakers. The speakers looked back at the audience.” What that audience was hearing, meanwhile, was a group of pieces from the new Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, created by composers who included—alongside the tape-music pioneers Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachevsky, and recent convert, Milton Babbitt—Mario Davidovsky.

Perhaps Davidovsky was the only one dissatisfied by the occasion. He missed the element of performance and decided to rectify that lack in a work for his friend and colleague Harvey Sollberger. Hence *Synchronisms No. 1* for flute and electronic sound (1962), the start of an extraordinary series of pieces playing across the interface between live and electronic. That which is strange, even alien, is drawn into the territory of the familiar, and this territory is extended to accommodate it. Thus, through working with electronics Davidovsky enlarged his understanding (and our understanding) of what music could be, to the point where electronics became no longer necessary. After *Synchronisms No. 7* (commissioned by the New York Philharmonic in the Boulez era) and *No. 8* (for wind quintet), both dating from 1974, he concentrated on work outside the studio, to which he has made only sporadic returns since, in the production of four more *Synchronisms* pieces. Though he established his reputation as an electronic composer, the great majority of his works are non-electronic, with a preference for chamber music.

Born in Argentina in 1934, into a family of Jewish refugees from Lithuania, Davidovsky grew up in a rich musical culture that included various folk traditions, Jewish and Catholic sacred music, tango, and the classical chamber literature. He studied in Buenos Aires and came to Tanglewood in 1958. There he was taken up by Aaron Copland and Babbitt, who made it possible for him to return to the U.S. in 1960 and settle in New York, as an associate of the new Columbia-Princeton center. He worked with Edgard Varèse and had a close relationship with Stefan Wolpe, both of whom provided him with examples of openness and independence. For though he has had a prestigious academic career, at Columbia and later at Harvard, and though he has been honored with prizes and awards (including a Pulitzer in 1971), his music comes from somewhere else, from personal qualities of gesture, imagination, understanding, curiosity, and warmth.

I will begin a piece, more often than not, with a statement like a motive. I try to make a statement like how Beethoven would present a theme in a symphony—very consistent and cohesive and natural and elegant. In my case, I construct that kind of statement out of motives that are essentially very different from each other. You could say that each of those motives have their own implied rhythm, their own implied harmony, even character. Then what I do, more or less looking back at Beethoven, I take those motives, and actually generate a piece of music. Instead of voice-leading things, I will develop strata. In a way, my stratification involves one person telling four stories, and though they might seem completely unrelated, eventually the four come together.

—Mario Davidovsky, quoted on the Art of the States website

Synchronisms No. 9 for violin and electronic sound (1988)

Davidovsky learned the violin as a young boy, and writing for it evidently comes naturally to him. But he also composes electronic music as if that were his natural habitat, creating the impression of a personality within and behind the artificial sound. Violin and electronic sound are two characters—sometimes twin characters, coming close together, even merging, while at other times they draw apart and either take their own paths or try to communicate, maintain their separate ways, or teach one another. There are a few short cadenza-like passages in which the violin is heard by itself; elsewhere, close rhythmic integration is possible because the electronic music is conventionally notated, almost as if it were an instrumental part, which in many ways it is. Lyricism, humor, and a competitive spirit all come out in the resulting duo, which plays for a little under nine minutes.

David Bowlin has happily related how the composer described the composition as “sort of like Paganini but with the wrong notes.” “It was a silly, superb direction for me in communicating how the piece is a caprice and should be tossed off, with a lyric warmth.”

Quartetto No. 2 for oboe and string trio (1996)

Besides five string quartets, of which he wrote the earliest when he was seventeen, Davidovsky has produced four works under the title *Quartetto* in each case replacing one of the string quartet’s violins with a visiting instrument, which inevitably takes on something of a solo character, as in the oboe quartets or piano quartets of the standard repertory. Like such works, too, Davidovsky’s nevertheless maintain the chamber-music principle of dialogue.

In *Quartetto No. 2*, the visitor is an oboe, from whose sound and nature surely comes the music’s easy fluctuation between reflective song and caprice. The single movement plays for a little over ten minutes, containing within that span a freely evolving mix of episodes that might suggest first-movement argument and growth, slow-movement melodiousness and rich harmony, and finale-like exuberance, all tumbled together. Often, where it might stray or linger, the music is called back by a recurrence of the opening motif, comprising a quick triplet rise to an accented note. The work ends with a solo cadenza, where one might wonder if the oboe is voicing freedom or aloneness. Perhaps both.

Romancero for soprano and mixed quartet (1983)

- I. Morenica a mi me llaman
- II. ¡Arriba canes arriba!
- III. Seguidillas
- IV. Triste estaba el Rey David

Davidovsky’s strikingly few vocal compositions have tended to be excavations from Hispanic or Jewish heritages that may not be entirely his own, but with which his music can vibrate in warm sympathy. In this case, he chose folk verse from Spain, a romancero being a collection of such poems. The melodies are not traditional. Instead, rather as Stravinsky did, Davidovsky creates original music that has certain elements of folk style – the tang of an ad hoc band in the writing for two woodwinds (flute and clarinet) and two strings (violin and cello), or a sense of modality in how the voice will sometimes move around within a small group of pitches, or a spontaneity in the instruments’ response to the vocal melody, which sometimes they echo. Another feature of the work is how thoroughly vocal it is, how sensitive to the voice’s range, movement, and expression—and yet this may not be a surprise, for though Davidovsky’s vocal output is small, all his music sings.

The four instruments provide a characterful and alert ambience right through, except in some beautiful moments when the singer travels alone. Most composers would want to end such a group of contrasted songs with the liveliest number, but Davidovsky, for very good reasons, reserves for this position his most inward and poignant piece.

Festino for guitar, viola, cello, and bass (1993)

A festino is a festival or party—terms that suit not only this ten-minute piece but also a lot of Davidovsky's chamber music, as this evening's examples will have indicated, if we allow that a celebration can include serious stuff as well as joking around and dancing. Once again, as in the *Quartettos* and *Synchronisms*, the music springs from sameness and difference, with two components in play— in this case, the guitar and the trio of lower strings. These can create the impression of a “super-guitar,” out of pizzicatos and finger taps, or, when bowed, they can go their own way, remote from their companion. Daniel Lippel suggests how this piece projects the stratification and relatedness of characters Davidovsky has described: “The juggled identities in *Festino* include several moods: clever/clownish, melodramatic/passionate, awkward/apologetic, nostalgic/wistful, and focused/resolute. In almost all of these passages, the primary motive of the piece—the short three-note figure that opens the work in the viola—appears, dressed in different expressive garb. This little motive is the part of oneself that we carry through all the different spaces of our lives.”

Festino Notturmo (*Festino No. 2*) for eight instruments (1999)

Festino turned out to be the start of another family in Davidovsky's output, being followed by this *Festino notturno* and by *Cantione sine textu* (*Song Without Words*), or *Festino No. 3*. In the present piece, the flowing, interpenetrating characters, or stories, that are a Davidovsky specialty again unfold in a celebratory atmosphere, but the central guitar of *Festino* has gone and the larger ensemble makes for more complex, three-way dialogues: there are four string instruments (violin, viola, cello, bass), three woodwinds (oboe, clarinet, bassoon), and a trumpet. In the first half of the piece, these dialogues sometimes come to moments of assertion, counter-assertion, and impasse. Then the opening gesture—a unison G from all the strings except the bass, bouncing into a downward cello glissando stopped by the bass's pizzicato entry—comes back, and the discourse continues in a more fluid, harmonious manner, though again with constant variety of feeling and color. Another repeat of the starting point introduces the final section.

Synchronisms No. 12 for clarinet and electronic sound (2006)

The latest (so far) of the *Synchronisms* pieces is this compact quasi-concerto for clarinet, complete with a substantial cadenza. As in the violin *Synchronisms*—or, indeed, the chamber pieces—disparate media make for a dialogue of flickering character within one smooth single arc. This time the electronic voice is composed partly with recorded clarinet sounds, contributing to the poetry and playfulness of the interplay.

Postscript

There is an excellent series of compact discs—three so far—on the Bridge label, of which Bridge 9097 includes three of the ensemble pieces from tonight's program and Bridge 9171 offers *Synchronisms No. 9* (as well as *No. 5* for percussion ensemble and *No. 6* for piano). ICE's version of *Festino*, produced by New Focus Recordings, is posted on the Art of the States website.

Two substantial interviews with the composer, by Bob Gluck and Frank J. Oteri, can be reached by way of his Wikipedia entry. Another interview is on Youtube.